

# THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR: THE UNITED STATES BECOMES A WORLD POWER

The Spanish-American War lasted only about ten weeks in 1898. However, the war had far-reaching effects for both the United States and Spain.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Causes of the War

The conflict had complex beginnings. By the 1890s, Cuba had unsuccessfully battled Spain for independence for many years. In 1895, the Cuban revolutionary José Martí led an expedition to the island, attempting to seize power from Spain.

As a result of U.S. economic interests in Cuba, the U.S. government sought to stabilize the situation. An agreement was negotiated between the United States and Spain by which Cuba would become self-governing on January 1, 1898.

Events derailed this plan. Following a January riot in Havana, President William McKinley sent the *USS Maine* to Havana to protect U.S. citizens and interests. On February 15, an explosion sank the *Maine*, killing 266 men on board.

On April 19, Congress passed the Teller Amend-



"Rough Rider Roosevelt"  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3g02471>

ment, which said that the United States would not establish permanent control over Cuba. The United States declared war on Spain on April 25.

### The War

Although Cuba played a key role in the start of the war, battles between the U.S. and Spain took place around the world. In fact, the first hostilities took place in the Philippines on May 1, in the Battle of Manila Bay. Fighting did not occur in Cuba until June; a key battle took place on July 1. One of the leaders of U.S. forces in this battle was Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, who led a cavalry regiment known as the Rough Riders.

In May, U.S. troops landed in Puerto Rico, where they faced little Spanish opposition. By August 2, the Spanish and the Americans began to negotiate an end to the conflict, with the Spanish accepting the peace terms laid out by President McKinley.

Hostilities formally ended on August 12, 1898.

The Treaty of Paris, ending the Spanish-American War, was signed on December 10. Spain gave up Guam, Puerto Rico, its possessions in the West Indies, and the Philippines in exchange for a U.S. payment of \$20 million. The United States occupied Cuba but, as provided for in the Teller Amendment, did not try to annex it.

### Media Coverage

The war helped fuel major changes in U.S. news media. U.S. newspapers covered the war with gusto. Technological innovations changed reportage and documentation. New technology that made it easier for newspapers to publish photographs allowed the papers to publish more illustrations and less text. Some reporters in the field in Cuba provided excellent, firsthand reporting. Reporters who used telegraphs as the basis for their stories, however, typically relied on secondhand information.

Major newspaper owners—including Joseph Pulitzer of the *NY World* and William Randolph Hearst of the *NY Herald*—viewed public interest in the war as an opportunity to sell newspapers. The papers, in a circulation war, featured sensational coverage and attention-grabbing photographs of events in Cuba. Although the cause of the explosion of the *USS Maine* was unknown, for example, New York newspapers blamed Spain. Historians once held that biased coverage of the war, often referred to as yellow journalism, was a cause of the war. Today, however, historians find less evidence for that claim.

At the time of the war's outbreak, film was a new medium, and the conflict became a popular topic. Short films showed such scenes as servicemen exercising, Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders on their horses, and funeral processions of dead soldiers. Motion pictures began to move from being

seen as a fad to an accepted method of documenting historical events—even though some films depicting events from the war were actually re-enactments.

### Aftermath

Victory in the Spanish-American War transformed the United States, a former colony, to an imperial power. Many Americans saw this development as a natural part of the nation's "Manifest Destiny"—the belief that expansion of the United States was both right and inevitable.

Opposition to this new role also existed. In June 1898, the American Anti-Imperialist League was formed to fight annexation of the Philippines. Its members included former President Grover Cleveland, industrialist Andrew Carnegie, author Mark Twain, and labor leader Samuel Gompers.

A recognized war hero, Theodore Roosevelt instantly became credible as a political candidate. Roosevelt was elected governor of New York in 1898 and vice president of the United States in 1901. He became the youngest president to date later that year, when President McKinley was assassinated just months into his second term.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

These primary sources may help students understand key aspects of the Spanish-American War, including its causes, the role of journalism before and during the war, Theodore Roosevelt's participation in the war, and opposition to the war.

- Focus students' attention on primary sources about the sinking of the *USS Maine*. Compare and contrast treatments of the sinking in different documents. How did people respond to the sinking of the *USS Maine*? How were events involving the *USS Maine* covered in the media? Ask students to think about what claim or argument each document makes about the sinking of the *USS Maine*. What evidence does each document present as support? What evidence do students find to evaluate whether media coverage was sensationalized or factual?
- Focus on the "The Big Type War of the Yellow Kids" cartoon. What can students infer from this cartoon about the role of newspapers in the war? Challenge students to determine its creator's point of view or purpose, and to explain how it is conveyed in the cartoon. Students might also look at other documents in the set to find evidence that supports or contradicts the point of view in this cartoon.
- This set includes a short film of the sinking of the *USS Maine*. Students might compare and contrast this film to *The Sinking of the USS Maine*, a reenactment made in New Jersey, according to the catalog record. What clues are there to indicate which film is an actuality and which is a reenactment? Why is it important to be able to identify when a film is a re-creation of a scene? For additional reenactments, search [The Spanish-American War in Motion Pictures](#) using the term "reenactment."
- Ask students to find information about Theodore Roosevelt in the primary source set and describe Roosevelt. How is he presented in each primary source? What aspects of Roosevelt's life or character would lead people to believe that he should run for public office? Students may research other military heroes who went into politics. Would students conclude that the American people have found military heroes to be good government leaders as well?
- What evidence can students find in the primary source set that some people were opposed to the war or some aspects of the war? What arguments can be made for or against the new role of the United States as an imperial power? Have students integrate the information from a number of primary sources and prepare a pamphlet or editorial responding to the Anti-Imperialist League's leaflet.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



### **Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers**

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/spanishAmWar.html>



### **The Spanish-American War in Motion Pictures**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sawhtml/sawhome.html>



### **An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/rbpehtml/>

## PRIMARY SOURCES WITH CITATIONS



"[Rough] Rider Roosevelt." Lithograph. New York: McLoughlin Bros., Inc, 1898. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3g02471>



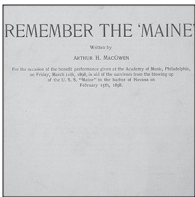
Taylor, F. H., lithographer. "Strategic Map of Our War with Spain." Map. Trenton, NJ: War Map Publishing Company, 1898. From Library of Congress: *Map Collections*.

<http://www.loc.gov/item/98687203>



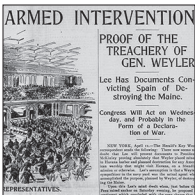
"Explosion of the Maine." Chromolithograph. New York: Muller & Luchsinger, c. June 21, 1898. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ds.01036>



MacOwen, Arthur H. "Remember the Maine." Benefit performance given at the Academy of Music, Philadelphia, March 11, 1898. From Library of Congress: *An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadside and Other Printed Ephemera*.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.16004100>



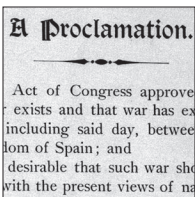
"The President Favors Armed Intervention." *San Francisco Call*, April 12, 1898 (front page). From Library of Congress: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1898-04-12/ed-1/seq-1/>



War Correspondents/Thomas A. Edison, Inc. (Edison Manufacturing Co., April 21, 1898), 35 mm film. From Library of Congress: *Early Motion Pictures, 1897-1920*.

<http://www.loc.gov/item/98500967>



McKinley, William. "Existence of War-Spain." Washington: April 26, 1898. From Library of Congress: *An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadside and Other Printed Ephemera*.

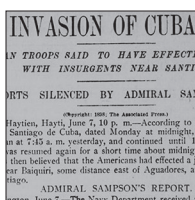
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.23901800>



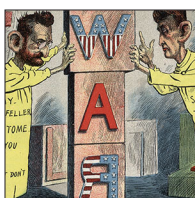
"The Great Naval Battle off Cavite (Manila Bay), Fought May 1st, 1898." Lithograph. Chicago: Kurz & Allison, c. 1898. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pgs.01865>



"The Maine Is Avenged." *Daily Kentuckian* (Hopkinsville, KY), May 3, 1898 (front page). From Library of Congress: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86069396/1898-05-03/ed-1/seq-1/>



*New-York Tribune*. June 8, 1898, (front page). From Library of Congress: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1898-06-08/ed-1/seq-1/>



Barritt, Leon, artist. "The Big Type War of the Yellow Kids." Lithograph. *Vim* 1, no. 2 (June 29, 1898). From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsc.02832>



"Spanish American War, Infantry, Holding Krag Rifle with Fixed Bayonette, Cartridge Belt." Photographic print. Tampa, FL: Electro Photo Co., ca. 1898. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010645139/>



*Roosevelt's Rough Riders*. (American Mutoscope and Biograph Co., 1903 [created ca. 1898]), 35mm film. From Library of Congress: *Early Motion Pictures, 1897-1920*.  
<http://www.loc.gov/item/98500909>



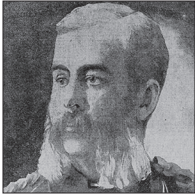
"Spain's Fleet Destroyed, Ladrone Islands Are Ours," *Salt Lake Herald*, July 4, 1898 (front page). From Library of Congress: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85058130/1898-07-04/ed-1/seq-1/>





"Col. Theodore Roosevelt of the 'Rough Riders' – after his Return from Cuba." Stereograph. New York: Strohmeyer & Wyman, November 14, 1898. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a24095>



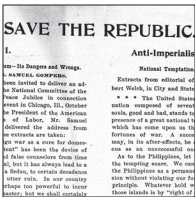
"No Trifling with Filipinos Now," *San Francisco Call*, February 7, 1899, 3. From Library of Congress: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1899-02-07/ed-1/seq-3/>



Ehrhart, S. D., artist. "If They'll Only be Good." Chromolithograph. New York: J. Ottmann Lithography Co., January 31, 1900. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.25391>



"Save the Republic. Anti-Imperialist Leaflet no. 11[-21]." Washington, DC: Anti-Imperialist League, 1899. From Library of Congress: An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.2390200h>